

# Straight Talk is Tough...but the Only Way

by Bob Phillips, President RW & Associates, Inc.

**S**ince the beginning of the new millennium, it seems that at least once a week something appears in the news that another person or organization has been found to have lied about their credentials, the finances of their company, or committed a crime that resulted from some type of dishonest behavior. It makes you wonder why we do not see more examples of people stepping up and exposing the crimes or dishonest behavior while the acts are being committed and not waiting until after the behavior is discovered. But very quickly I remember why prevention does not happen!

As a person who has worked for more than 30 years with people in a variety of situations, I have found that most of us are risk-adverse, don't want to be involved in others' issues, or have a personal fear that something will happen if we speak up, give our honest opinion or become a whistleblower. If there was a simple answer to why this behavior happens, it would be easy to fix; but each of us has a different set of experiences, values and levels of confidence in confronting issues that require honesty and straight talk.

We discovered when we were talking to individuals while preparing to write our book, *Absolute Honesty; Building a Corporate Culture That Values Straight Talk and Rewards Integrity* (AMACOM June 2003), that most people would rather "go along to get along" when faced with difficult situations that they perceive will have a negative impact on them either personally or in their career. Most of us, when faced with a situation that requires us to step up and be directly honest with another person, will back off and take the route of least resistance.

We have found that there are a number of reasons why that happens; but by following a few simple steps a person can use and practice, that straight talk and honesty will become an integral way of interacting with others. As with anything we do, if you don't practice these techniques, you will never become proficient.

With any new approach the techniques may be clumsy and may not feel comfortable at first, but do not hesitate to practice and make mistakes.

## Why is it Important to be Honest?

When I am asked this question my first response is to give the person these seven very simple reasons:

- 1. You create trust with others.** If you always tell the truth, people can count on you.
- 2. Do the right thing.** Truth and doing the right thing go hand-in-hand.
- 3. Discover it is not as painful as you think.** The pain exists prior to telling the truth, not after being honest.
- 4. Avoid paying a higher price for lying.** Lying in the short term may be helpful, but over the long term you will pay the price. Lying usually comes full circle.
- 5. Get it behind you.** Practice "real-time honesty" which requires real-time vigilance and a willingness to deal with uncomfortable situations.
- 6. Keep things simple.** When you lie, you have to remember what you said and to whom...as you continue it can become an impossible task.



**Bob Phillips is President and CEO of RW & Associates, Inc., a management consulting firm that specializes in helping companies with organizational issues, workforce planning and general human capital-related issues. He has over 30 years of experience in human resources at all levels. He is the coauthor of the book *Absolute Honesty; Building a Corporate Culture That Values Straight Talk and Rewards Integrity* (AMACOM, 2003). Bob can be contacted at [bob@rwassociates.net](mailto:bob@rwassociates.net)**

**7. Avoid damaging relationships.** In the end, the impact lying has on both personal and work relationships is more damaging to us as individuals.

As in any given situation, all seven reasons may be overkill, but any one of the seven should be enough by itself.

## Delivering the Honest Message

Now that we have discussed why it is important to be honest I would be negligent not to mention that it is not the message alone that is the key to delivering feedback. It is not only how honest we are, but how the message is delivered.

What my years in human resources have taught me is that sometimes the method of delivery can be more important than the message itself. If a message is delivered with a club, the person receiving the message will only have a bump on the head and

not hear what was intended in the message. That is why any honest message needs to be delivered in a way that the receiver will hear, process and respond to the feedback they are given.

A message is only effective if the receiver hears what is being said and can effectively process the information. As manager and coach, I always plan how, why and what the expected results are when I am going to deliver honest feedback messages.

I use the following steps to increase the effectiveness of the message that is being delivered:

- What is the message? What are the key points?
- What is the potential impact on the receiver — positive and negative?
- What is the best way to deliver messages to that person?
- What happens if issues come up that I am not prepared to discuss — what is my contingency plan?
- What are my expected results?
- What action/actions need to happen going forward?

No matter how difficult the message may be to deliver, it is always easier when you are prepared.

### **Why are We Afraid to be Honest and Straight with Others?**

Being honest is never easy in the best of circumstances, let alone when we are faced with the fear of telling the truth.

We may not even understand how that fear is impacting our behavior. We have identified a number of critical fears that we believe have a tremendous impact on why people are not always honest.

**Fear of retribution:** This is the fear

most raised — that if I do something a negative event will happen to me in return.

### **Fear of hurting other people's feelings:**

We perceive that we will damage our relationship with another person so we do not say anything, thereby resulting in nothing changing and we remain in the status quo.

**Fear of change:** Many of us have been successful using the same methods and knowledge for years. Getting out of our comfort zone is painful and difficult and telling the truth sometimes drives dramatic change.

**Fear of being disliked:** Even the toughest want to be liked by others; and yet when we speak up and give honest feedback, we are afraid that it will impact our relationships with others. If direct and honest feedback that is well intended impacts a relationship, my question would be, "Do you want those individuals as your friends?"

**Fear of losing support:** In many organizations building support of your ideas takes many years to achieve, so it is understandable why people are hesitant to speak up and say what they really think if it goes against everyone else in the organization.

**Fear of paying the price:** Too many of us perceive the price we pay for speaking up is not worth what it will cost us in the long run with relationships or career progression.

**Fear of losing face:** For many people the worst thing that can happen is not to be accepted by others. To many the way we do this is to remain quiet and not tell others how we feel about any controversial issue. Once we have identified our own fears, it is much easier to deal with why we and others are afraid to speak up and not say what we think, not give honest feedback to others, or take risks and go against the flow when we are the

only one who does not see it like others.

### **The Strength to be Honest and Straight-forward**

The next time you are faced with the difficult opportunity, remember that you may be the only one who has the power to step up and deliver the tough message.

As my close friend Gena said to me after spending an hour discussing *Absolute Honesty* on her radio talk show, "In the end, honesty and straight talk is really up to us as individuals and no matter what others do or say only we know if we are being totally honest."

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